

“Non-conform” adolescent behaviors in family system context. A case analysis

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The author describes the course of family therapy and analyses the function and meaning of symptom behavior of a 15 years old girl in family system context.

Key words: “non conform” behavior, adolescent, family therapy

Introduction

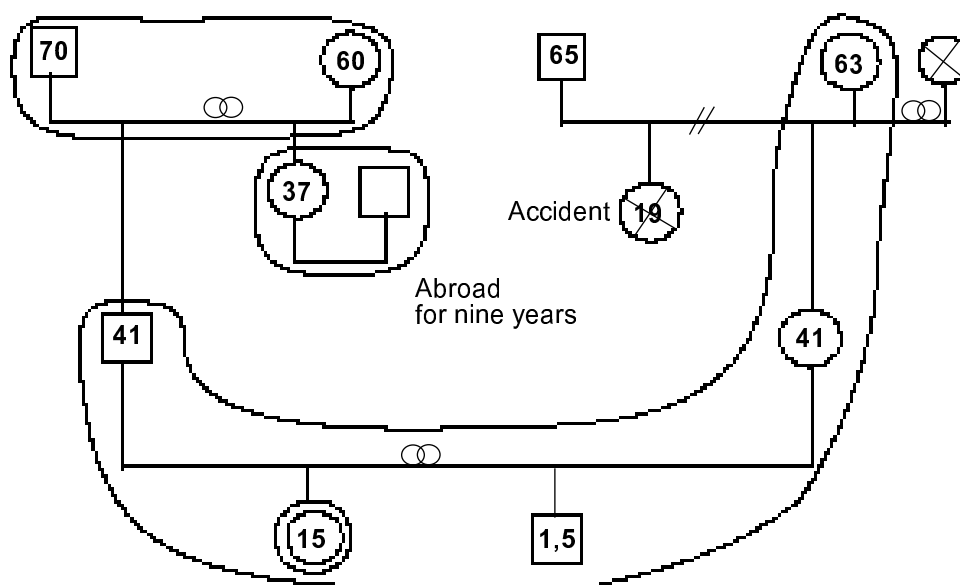
Speaking of “non conform” behaviors we cannot avoid asking the question “What is the behavior non conform with?” It is a question concerning the way in which the norm determining the classification and evaluation of a given behavior is understood. There are different ways of understanding the norm, depending on the adopted criteria [4]. These criteria, which are adopted by us – observers, depend upon the time and space in which we live. They determine our perception, thinking and evaluation. Depending on the level of reference of the observed phenomena: individual, family or social, explanation and evaluation of the same behavior may change. A given behavior which, on the social level, is evaluated as negative and destructive (incompatible with social norms and expectations and, therefore, threatening the society), may be recognized as positive and constructive on the family system level (e.g., it may unify the whole family system and save it from decomposition). On the individual level, it may seem incomprehensible and nonsensical until we refer to one of the theories explaining human behavior. A behavior devoid of contexts means nothing [1], [2], [3].

In accord with systemic theory, symptom behaviors reconstruct balance in the family system disturbed by the so-called vertical stressors (patterns, myths, family secrets passed from generation to generation) and/or horizontal stressors (developmental changes in the cycle of family life, unforeseen, sudden events like death, illness, accident). Thus, symptom behaviors frequently fulfil a positive function for the family system. Paradoxically, their occurrence decreases stress and anxiety level within the family system and protects it from passing to the subsequent phase in the cycle of

family life [1], [5], [3].

In my further considerations, I shall focus my attention mostly on family system. I shall try to show in what way the behaviors of one member of a family system, socially recognized as non-adjusted, like a refusal to attend school or aggressive behaviors, are “adjusted” to the closest environment – to the family. On the basis of the hitherto course of a family therapy of a fifteen years old patient hospitalized in the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Department, I shall discuss the function and sense of symptom behaviors of this girl for the family system.

Martha was admitted to hospital at her parents’ request. It was caused by her refusal to go to a secondary school. In form 5 she ceased to attend school; since form 6 to form 8 she received individual teaching. Earlier, doctors suggested Martha’s hospitalization several times, but her parents did not give their consent to it. For ten years Martha was



Genogram of Martha’s family

treated by specialists: psychiatrists and psychologists.

Analysis of functions of symptom behaviors for the family system on the basis of family therapy sessions

Session I. Parents complained about their daughter’s behaviors which were socially unacceptable: lack of social contacts, refusal to attend school, and, first of all, her aggression – she beat her mother and grandmother. Whenever Martha’s mother quarreled with grandmother (her mother), Martha became aggressive. Martha’s grandmother, a very important person in the family, was recognized as the dominating person, imperi-

ous and, at the same time, very emotional. Martha, like her grandmother, experienced everything excessively: seeing drastic social scenes, e.g., a drunkard in the street – she cried; hearing others quarrel or complain – she became aggressive. Then she beat either her mother or her grandmother.

Session II (During her stay in hospital, Martha decided that after leaving the hospital she would stay at home till the end of the school year). On the second family meeting it turned out that mother enjoyed Martha’s future stay at home. Mother believed that Martha’s presence would be a great help and relief for her, since Martha would “distract” grandmother from her. Martha had always had numerous demands and requests addressed to her grandmother (regarding food or purchase of various things), and grandmother was willing to fulfil them. With this behavior, Martha “attracted” grandmother to herself, and “distracted” her from her mother.

Comment: It can be said that Martha became a mediator in the complicated relations between mother and grandmother. She resigned from going to school and decided to stay at home both for her mother’s and grandmother’s good and for the sake of the whole family. Martha’s presence at home as a mediator and “buffer” between mother and grandmother maintained a proper distance between these two women, thus protecting them from too close a relation threatening with mutual hurting and breakout of an open conflict. The situation of a conflict between Martha’s two close persons would be for her impossible to bear. Her constant presence at home and her mediation between mother and grandmother diminished the tension in this dyad, and, therefore, in the whole family system.

After two months’ stay in hospital, Martha was dismissed to go home.

Session III During the third family meeting Martha’s resignation from herself and her development for the sake of the family system became visible. A week before, Martha and her mother attended a control visit at a psychiatrist’s, where Martha’s school and her future were discussed. Since that visit Martha was irritated, nervy and aggressive towards her mother and grandmother. During the session she declared that she did not care for her own life and future, and that she would like to die. She admitted, however, that there was something she cared for, but she did not want to say what it was. In the course of further conversation it turned out that for both parents family was the only value that justified resignation from one’s own life. It was connected with devoting one’s own life and with resignation from one’s own way of life or one’s own needs. If Martha disappeared, her mother would develop depression from which she would not recuperate till the end of her life, and she would have to receive hospital treatment. Her father would cry (which he never does) or would turn to drink, and the whole family would fall into pieces.

Comment: Discussion of consequences that Martha’s death would bring for the family system revealed Martha’s basic importance for further existence and functioning of the family as a whole and for her parents’ further lives. Martha was an important part of the family system, necessary to maintain normal and apparently proper functioning of each parent and the whole family. This indicated serious problems with self-identification of each of the parents and lack of marriage bond between them. We could say that Martha, giving up her own life and her own affairs (which was

manifested in active refusal to attend school, rejection of contacts with her peers and remaining at home) adjusted to the basic family value, i.e., resignation from one's own life for the sake of the family. Due to her parents' identification problems and marriage bond disturbances, Martha's undertaking realization of developmental tasks of the adolescence period (which means choosing her own way of life and departing from the family system) would threaten with disruption of the family.

Session IV. At this meeting it turned out that Martha, unexpectedly for all, started to attend a friendly school library; contrary to her earlier announcements, she did not stay at home. At this session, for the first time she suggested the subject of discussion – love. Martha's love was Robespierre; she liked that he beheaded people. She did not want to forsake him for the love of a living person – it would be a betrayal. However, it was maternal love or rather lack of this love in the mother-daughter relation in mother's generational family that soon became the object of discussion.

It turned out that in mother's family there occurred repetitive models of mother-daughter relation passed from generation to generation. Mother did not take care of her daughter. The role of the mother was played by the grandmother. When the daughter became a mother and the mother became a grandmother, the grandmother took better care of the granddaughter than she did before of the daughter. The grandmother was critical, despotic and imperious for the daughter and, at the same time, protective for the granddaughter.

Comment: In subsequent generations, the mother-daughter relation was highly frustrating. For the daughter it was so due to the lack of warmth and support from her mother. On the other hand, in the mother, her love to her daughter was destroyed by her own jealousy and envy of the greater love and care with which her mother endowed her daughter and which she herself had not received from her mother in her childhood. The relation between the grandmother and the granddaughter was strong and positive, though marked with significant feeling of guilt towards the mother. The relation between the mother and the grandmother remained very strong, but conflicting.

It can be said that:

1. Martha's strong, positive feelings to Robespierre reflected Martha's feelings to her grandmother who was recognized as the "family tyrant". They were also an expression of the deeply hidden and frustrated in the childhood feelings of Martha's mother towards her own mother: of love and a child's great attachment. Martha loved Robespierre like her mother loved her own mother (Martha's grandmother), though in the childhood she was a "monster". In this family, open expression of love and attachment threatened with rejection and exposed one to painful experiences and disappointments.
2. Martha took over the responsibility for her grandmother's well being from her mother. Mother refused to take care of her aging mother in revenge for her lack of maternal responsibility in her childhood. (Martha was the only family member who worried what would happen to grandmother if the family moved to a new flat without her. She always remembered about grandmother's important events like Christmas party at the club, and took care that her grandmother could take part in them).

3. As it turned out later, in the family Martha had the power of her great-grandmother whom grandmother had obeyed and who had taken care of Martha’s mother in her childhood. (Great-grandmother died when Martha was two years old). When the family had lost the person who was very important both for Martha’s mother and her grandmother, the girl took over her role: “ordered” and “tamed” her grandmother and took care of her mother.

Session V Martha was the only member of the family who was willing to talk, and she suggested a discussion concerning her difficulties in contacts with her peers.

It turned out that Martha, not talking to her peers, avoided the situation of speaking about herself and her family, and thus obeyed family prohibitions and expectations. When her parents were at Martha’s age, they never talked about themselves and their families with their peers or persons from outside their families. In the parents’ generational families there was a non-written prohibition of discussing the family. Violating this prohibition the parents would face great disapproval or even physical aggression on the part of their parents. In their present family they introduced a similar, never verbalized prohibition which was now obeyed by Martha.

Session VI. At this session, a more open discussion about family history and present situation, the never-ending family conflict and variable dyad coalitions became possible. Initially, soon after getting married, the husband tried to fight for determining external boundaries of the new family; he quarreled with his mother-in-law and his wife’s grandmother. There were two coalitions then: the young couple and Martha in opposition to Martha’s grandmother and great-grandmother. The open war lasted for about two-three years, till the great-grandmother’s death. Having lost her ally, the grandmother was lonely and Martha took her great-grandmother’s place. During the day Martha’s mother was in coalition with the grandmother (they talked much, mostly complained together or quarreled). When the husband came home, Martha’s mother “left” the grandmother for a short time. Then Martha “took care” of her grandmother. The mother got close to the grandmother when the father had long talks with Martha. Since Martha started to be aggressive towards her mother and grandmother, the two women talked to each other less, and had better control of themselves, that is, quarreled less and ceased to complain.

Comment: It can be said that Martha, manifesting aggressive behavior towards her mother and grandmother:

1. took care of the family’s external boundaries, taking her father’s place in his fight for them: while father was absent, she separated her mother and grandmother “for” him;
2. reinforced her father’s weak position in the family;
3. cared for preservation of generational boundaries: she separated her mother from her mother’s mother – she did what her mother did not manage to do earlier;
4. cared for inviolability and autonomy of family members: she prevented her mother and grandmother from behaviors with which they hurt each other (criticism, resentment, quarrels and complaints);
5. relieved her tension connected with frustration of her own developmental needs caused by her strong bond with the family system that made Martha’s own develop-

ment and especially her emotional and social development very difficult.

Session VII. The next meeting revealed a hidden struggle for power and position between the spouses, mutual discrediting of decisions made by the partner, and disinclination to assume responsibility for themselves and their actions. Discussion concerning Martha's aggression became possible. It could be expected that manifesting aggression Martha expressed the hidden feelings of the husband to his wife and mother-in-law; feelings of a husband who did not manage to loosen the emotional bond between his wife and her mother. However, the parents consistently recognized „strangers”, i.e., persons from outside the family: aggressive or grumbling passers-by, or “negative social phenomena” like alcoholism as the only cause of their daughter's aggressive behaviors.

Comment: It can be said that Martha responded to aggression and weakness of other persons. Although the cause of aggression was transferred (from family members to persons from the outside world), the object of aggression remained the same: mother and grandmother, and, to a lesser extent, father, who was “merely bitten”.

In the period between the 7th and 8th session Martha for the first time talked with the physician whom she earlier asked for outpatient care, for more than an hour. Previously, Martha never talked for such a long time with a “stranger”, a person from outside the family alone, without her mother. She accepted the offer of an individual therapy, and since that moment she manifested balanced mood, without fits of anger or sadness and without aggression (though the therapy was expected to start no sooner than in September).

Session VIII. At the meeting, just before the school year started, Martha admitted that she did not want to go to school. She preferred to stay at home, but if her parents ordered her to attend school, she would. She expressed doubts as to the truth of her conviction that her parents wanted her to go to school. The discussion that followed confirmed her doubts. Martha's going to school would be a very significant change for the whole family. It would evoke a powerful stress and tension in all family members, especially in the mother. It would stimulate conflicts between her parents, evoked by the mother who would not cope with increased tensions and duties. It turned out that the greatest stress and source of anxiety for the family and especially for the mother would issue from the situation in which Martha would go to school and attend it for a long time, incessantly. Although as regards intellectual level Martha exceeded her peers (she acquired I.I. = 140 on Wechsler Scale, and harmonious development of cognitive functions was recognized), both parents worried that she would not pass term examinations if she did not do her homework with her mother. The discussion about the daughter's going to a secondary school evoked her mother's recollections of the period when she attended school herself. She described that period as horrible; she always forced herself to study and to go to school. She did it for her mother, who was proud of her results. If she had refused to go to school, it would be a tragedy for her mother.

Comment: It can be said that Martha's situation was opposite to her mother's. Going

to school and continuing her education, Martha would expose her mother to a great stress and additional duties with which the latter would not be able to cope. It would also cause significant increase of tension and conflicts within the family.

Conclusion.

In the course of family therapy it turned out that Martha's behaviors recognized as socially “non-conform” (refusal to go to school, absence of contacts with peers and aggressive behaviors) were of great importance for the functioning of the whole family system. They protected all family members from confrontation with conflicts and problems that remained hidden and unsolved for many years. The sources of these problems were in the past generations and in trans-generational messages. From the individual and social points of view Martha's symptom behaviors were a manifestation of maladjustment both to the individual developmental needs of a 15 years old girl and to social norms and expectations addressed to an adolescent. However, they were “adjusted” to the family hidden norms and prohibitions as well as to the abilities and expectations of family system members. They were an expression of Martha's love and great attachment to her family for whose sake she was ready to sacrifice her own development for a long time.

At present, Martha attends school to which she commutes on her own. She does well at school and she is not helped in her study. She is not aggressive at home. Her family has moved away from her grandmother's and settled in a new flat. Persuaded by her husband, Martha's mother has decided to start working.

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